

Why Dumping Yard Waste into Wetlands is Harmful

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As the town's Conservation Agent, tasked with helping protect its wetlands, I am constantly saddened to see large piles of leaves, grass clippings and other yard debris dumped in wetlands. I wish I had the time to stop at each property to tell the owners that **dumping yard waste in wetlands constitutes fill, and is harmful as well as illegal under state and local wetland protection laws**. Instead, I have written this to help educate the citizens of Spencer on the subject.

The Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act and the Spencer Wetland Protection Bylaw were created, as stated in the Bylaw: "The purpose of this chapter is to preserve and protect the floodplains and wetlands and adjoining lands in the Town of Spencer by regulating and controlling activities deemed to have significant or cumulative effect upon the functions and characteristics of such floodplains and wetlands including, but not limited to:

- Public or private water supply
- Flood control
- Erosion or sedimentation control
- Storm damage prevention
- Water quality
- Water pollution prevention
- Fisheries
- Land containing shellfish
- Rare Species habitat"
- Recreation

So why does dumping natural, biodegradable materials like leaves and grass harm the wetlands? The short answer is that as the leaves and grass break down they become soil, and that soil fills in the wetlands. Filled wetlands do not offer the same flood storage capacity, so the risk for downstream flooding is increased. In addition, dumping yard waste into wetlands can for example alter the water chemistry of the wetlands causing nutrient overload leading to algal blooms in downstream lakes and ponds. Finally, filling wetlands destroys wetland habitat for creatures such as salamanders, frogs and turtles.

It is important to note that not all wetlands have cattails; some are dominated by grasses, some by red maple trees, and some by shrubs. So, just because you don't see cattails, don't think it's not a wetland. Besides floodplains and wetlands, there are other important resource areas such as the banks of streams and stream channels, which are critical to protecting roads and buildings from storm damage. **Yard waste may not be dumped onto a stream channel** because, among other reasons, it can

smother vegetation and increase the chance of erosion of the slope, and harm adjacent sensitive resource areas such as bordering vegetative wetlands.

Finally, residents need to understand that studies have shown that activities near wetlands very often harm the wetlands. So if you choose to compost your yard waste on your own property, make sure that your compost area is at least 25' from the wetland.

If you have any additional questions or would like help understanding the limits or activities permitted/prohibited within the area of conservation jurisdiction, please feel free to contact the Conservation office at 508-885-7500 x 123 or at grussell@spencerma.gov.

Your cooperation is appreciated, thank you.

This educational piece was originally developed by Alicia Geilen, CEP, Ipswich Conservation Agent who has generously allowed Spencer to borrow heavily from it.